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## Muskegon Chronicle

### County clears way for better collection of overdue fines

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Before the 60th District Court's collection staff can expand and produce more revenue, it needs more space in which to operate.

And finding more space is always a challenge in the crowded Michael E. Kobza Hall of Justice.

But Muskegon County commissioners, meeting Tuesday as the courts/ public safety committee, addressed the problem by tentatively voting to spend up to \$22,273 on equipment for an expanded court collections office.

Space for the new office equipment is expected to be available by April, after thousands of old court files are moved out of the hall of justice.

Commissioners are expected to finalize their approval at their Feb. 16 full board meeting.

The district court's three-person collection staff has been raising eyebrows since 2002 by collecting roughly \$5.2 million in overdue fines and fees from people convicted of various offenses.

Last September, the county board approved a request to double the size of the collection staff, to more aggressively pursue unpaid fines and fees. The extra manpower will allow the staff to pursue older debts, as well as the newer accounts they've been focused on.

In the first year alone, the expanded staff is expected to collect nearly \$400,000 beyond the amount that the court would normally collect. After ex-penses, the net gain in revenue would be about \$224,000 in the first year, and about \$60,000 in subsequent years.

Part of the extra revenue will be set aside to create a fund for eventual remodeling of the district court's entire space on the first and second floors of the hall of justice. Court officials have complained for years about cramped working conditions.

But the collection staff has yet to expand its operations, because there's been no place to put new employees. The three current employees are stuffed in a tiny office on the second floor of the hall of justice.

The goal is to move two collections officers, who meet face-to-face with people who have overdue fines, across the hall into a section of a larger room that's currently used for court file storage. The clerical employees will remain in the small office.

Thousands of old court files will have to be moved before the office expansion can occur, according to District Court Administrator Mike Flanery. And that will require a lot of work because roughly 45,000 thick court files are produced every year, and state law requires the files to be stored intact for a minimum of 10 years, Flanery said.

Court employees will soon begin transferring older court files that are currently stored in a building on the county's south campus to a rented site in Muskegon. That will create room on south campus for thousands of more recent files that are stored in the hall of justice.

Only when those files are moved will there be extra office space available for the collection staff, Flanery said. The office space is expected to be ready, with the new employees on board, by April 1, he said.

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